

Teachers In The War Zone: A Hermeneutics Phenomenology

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ABSTRACT:- This qualitative-hermeneutics phenomenology study aimed to determine the traumatic experiences of teachers in the war zone. The participants were former and present teachers at Simone Elementary School in the Municipality of Kabacan. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted among five teacher-participants. Results revealed that war brought total chaos, fear and confusion since they were not informed by their immediate supervisor on the real condition of the place where they were teaching. It did not only displace women and children but teachers as well who were caught in the midst of fighting. There were stress debriefing conducted by UNICEF which helped them cope with their traumatic experiences. They suggested and recommended that preparedness plans may be formulated for the newly-hired teachers.

Keywords:- *traumatic experience, teachers, war zone, coping mechanism*

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' lives and safety have been always in the midst of danger. Those who are assigned to the remote areas need to travel for long hours in which sometimes they need to cross rivers, lakes and seas just to reach their destination. Not to mention, these places are sometimes infested by the armed men who are considered by the government as infidels and terrorist organizations. These situations did not stop teachers to fulfil their obligations, and above all, they need to sacrifice for the welfare of their families. The world has been shrouded with conflicts and violence which affected women and children in general. In Palestine for example, in which its people has been struggling against the Israel's occupation of their land. Teachers were exposed daily on the impact of violence which resulted to tension, unstable conditions and losing their professional identity (Qairami, 2016). Varied literatures focused only on the experiences of abused women and children (Gallagher, 1998; Humphreys and Thiara, 2002; Peled, Jaffe, and Edleson, 1994) in the warzone, on their traumatic experiences (Main and Hesse, 1990; Nader, 1997; Daud, Skoglund, and Rydelius, 2005) and on children who have been used as soldiers in the warzones (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 1994; McDonnell, and Akallo, 2007).

Most of the schools under West Kabacan District are along the mighty Rio Grande de Mindanao. In 2011, there was an armed conflict between the two Muslim rebels: the Moro National Liberation Front based in Barangay Nangaan and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in Barangay Simone, under the Municipality of Kabacan (Mindanews, 2011). This conflict displaced thousands of people and joining them were teachers. It disrupted classes and ruined the dreams of pupils who were actually thirsty of learning. We have found out that there were no studies conducted on the traumatic experiences of teachers in the war zones, and even the first of its kind in the institution. This study also provided information on the experiences of teachers in the government institutions most specifically in the Department of Education and their real situations which were not usually seen by the authorities. This study also presented the real stories of teachers in the warzone areas especially in this part of Mindanao, thus this study was pursued.

1.2 Research Problem

This study aimed to determine the traumatic experiences of teachers in the war zone.

Specifically, it answered the following research questions:

1. What are the traumatic experiences of teachers teaching in the war zone?
2. How did teachers cope up with their traumatic experiences?
3. What are their suggestions and recommendations to the newly-hired teachers assigned in the war zones?

II. METHOD

This chapter presents the participants, instruments, and design and procedure employed in this study.

2.1 Participants

The participants of this study were teachers from Simone Elementary School-West Kabacan District, Kabacan Cotabato. There were five (5) teachers to participate in this study especially those who experienced war in 2011.

1.3 Instruments

In this study, we prepared guide questions to extract the salient information from the participants. On the other hand, video/audio recorder was also utilized.

1.4 Design and Procedure

We used the qualitative-hermeneutics phenomenology research design. It involved creating meaning on lived experiences (Wilson and Hutchinson, 1991) and becoming part of experience, to the whole of experience to be able to have a profound involvement and understanding of the phenomenon (Annells, 1996; Polkinghorne, 1983). Moreover, San Jose (2016) pointed out that a study became hermeneutics if the researchers' similar experiences were also included or shared; thus, triangulating their experiences with the research participants.

Prior to the conduct of the study, we informed the target participants on the purpose and objectives of the study. The contents of the Human Subjects Consent-to-Participate Form was read and explained to them. After which, it was given to them to affix their signature. Upon their approval, we set the date and for the conduct of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on their convenient time. We personally gave them the letter of consent to participate in this study. Their signature manifested their approval to participate.

After the conduct of the interview, the responses of the participants were transcribed in verbatim manner and translated to English. Experts in language validated the veracity and verisimilitude of the transcription. After which, we conducted the thematic analysis which was presented in tabular form. Its purpose was to extract the themes from the responses of the participants during the interview. Presentation of the results and discussions followed.

III. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results based from the interview through the focus group discussion that we conducted. In this study, we asked series of questions to the participants. These were very sine qua non on the extraction of the needed information as presented in table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Teachers in the war zone.

Themes	Frequency of Response	Core Ideas
There was a total chaos	General	There were fear and confusion
Non-prepared teachers	Variant	Misinformed teachers on the on-going conflict
Displacement of women, children, and teachers	Variant	Conditions of women, children and teachers in the evacuation centers

The participants shared that it was their first time to experience such chaotic condition in their entire life that they did not know what to do. There was a total confusion and fear. One of them brought with her children thus she was afraid that they might be shot by snipers from the enemy lines. The teachers' lack of knowledge on the on-going conflict brought in the midst of quandary because they were not informed by their school head ahead of time. In the same vein, they also considered the women who indeed had the difficulty in times of such scenario than men. In the same manner, they were afraid on the situation of women, children and for the safe of their co-teachers.

Table 2. Theme and Core Idea on the Coping Mechanism of Teachers

Theme	Frequency of Response	Core Idea
Conduct of Stress Debriefing	General	Giving of lectures and different activities to cope with stress brought by war

Meanwhile, the stress debriefing conducted by the UNICEF helped the teachers to cope with the fears brought by war.

Table 3. Themes and Core Ideas on the suggestions and recommendations for newly-hired teachers.

Theme	Frequency of Response	Core Ideas
Utilization of different preparedness plan	General	Giving of warnings and instruction to teachers and the conduct of symposium on conflict preparedness
Job Commitment	General	Teachers focus towards their job for the welfare of the learners

Thereafter, the participants suggested that the newly hired teachers assigned in the war zone areas should be warned or instructed on the hazard that might occur in the area, the government should conduct symposium on conflict preparedness, and they must be ready at all times. Lastly, there must have the sense of commitment towards their job for the welfare of the learners.

IV. DISCUSSION

This chapter of the study, presents the in-depth analysis based from the result of the conducted interview through the focus group discussion. The war has been the cause of total confusion, death, and displacement of women, children and even teachers who are assigned in the war zones. Teachers were indeed traumatized by the armed conflict that happened in the Barangay Simone in Kabacan town somewhere in 2011. Because some of them brought with them children. As shared by the FGD *‘yun ang unang pagkakataon na naranasan ko ang gyera tapos kasama ko pa ang mga anak ko. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang aking uunahin. Imbis na unahin ko ang mga kagamitan ko, mas inuna ko pang iniligpit ang mga plato kasi hindi ko na alam ang gagawin. Kinuha ko rin ang mga damit na aming nilabhan, kinuha ko pa talaga ‘yung mga hanger at inilagay ko sa balde. Hindi na naming nadala ang iban naming damit dahil sinigurado naming na nadala naming ang school forms. Si sir Rog, sa kalaki-laki ng bag niya ang laman lang ay rice cooker. Ganoon pala ang gyera, parang nasa isip ko na lang ay ang mga bata. Nagkatumba-tumba na kami sa pump boat dahil mayroon daw mag-snipe. Hindi ko talaga ‘yon makalimutan na parang naging ghost town ang lugar. Patawa-tawa lang kami pero may putokan na. Hindi naming alam kung ano ang gagawin, ang inisip na lang naming ay makaalis pero hindi kami makatawid ng ilog kasi baka matamaan kami ng mga bala.* (It was my first time to experience such turbulence and my children were with me that time. I didn’t know what should be done first due to the chaos. Instead of prioritizing my possessions, I secured the dishes first because I could not think clearly. Then, I took all of my clothes from the clothesline as well as the hangers and placed them in a pail. We forget some of our clothes but we made sure that we carried our school forms. Sir Rods, despite having a really huge bag only managed to place inside his rice cooker. My experience during the war rendered me to think hazily, the only thing in my mind are my children who also saw what scenarios arise during such times. We hurried to the pump boat and stumbled upon from loading it because we were very afraid since there are snipers in the vicinity. When we were in the pump boat, we were very eager to leave that ghost town but we could not cross to the other side of the river fearing that we might get shot in the crossfire.FGDQ1A1).

I was the first to reach the school that day. Some of the parents informed me that most of the people were leaving going to the evacuation centers on the other side of the river. As a Grade Six adviser, what I did was, I got all the forms and my students records in my classroom and locked it. After a while, I heard the fires of gun coming from the camp of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) who wanted to conquer Simone (MILF held territory) to bring its people under their domain. One of the parents yelled that we need to run. I ran together with the evacuees. I felt how difficult it was to be an evacuee. There was in total confusion. Children cried and some of the parents especially women brought with them their children to the safest place. It was a terrible day to remember. During that time, teachers need to traverse Rio Grande de Mindanao on a motorized boat. Not being informed of the critical situation teachers head to school on that day (Sunday) not to be late to report in the school on Monday.

‘Yung sa akin naman, hindi ko alam kung saan tatakobo. Napansin ko na lang na dala-dala ko na lang ‘yung mga damit ko, mga bra, mga panty nandito lang sa kamay ko tapos tili takbo. Nainis talaga kami kay sir Rog kasi sabi niya walang gyera pero mas nauna pa siyang tumakbo. Pumunta kami sa skwelahan para kunin ‘yung mga forms tapos dumapa kami dahil mayroon dawng mga sniper. Gumapang kami papunta sa pump boat. ‘Yun talaga ang pinaka-traumatic sa akin (At that time, I don’t really know where to go. I noticed that I hand-carried my clothes including my undergarments as I was running. We were very angry at sir Rods because he said that there is no occurrence of war, to my surprise he was the very first to leave. We went to the school to take our

forms then, headed to the pump boat. We crawled on the way towards the pump boat because of the presence of snipers. That was the most traumatic experience for me, FGDQ1A3) the FGD articulated.

The FGD also added that, *'Kahit wala ako doon nung sumiklab ang gyera, ako pa ang unang nanginig nang marinig ko ang balita. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang mga pangyayari pero nahirapan akong making sa kanilang mga kwento. Ang mga gamit ko ay nandoon pa pati na ang mga school forms. Nagdasal na lang talaga ako na malayo ang mga kasamahan ko sa kapahamakan. Sana pagbalik naming doon, maayos na ang lahat. Hindi kami agad nakabalik kasi inilagay kasi sa ibang lugar na malapit sa Simone para magturo. Ang hindi ko talaga makalimutan ay yung mga nanay na itinali ang kanilang mga anak sa kanilang mga katawan upang hindi sila magkahiwa-hiwalay. Kung ako ang nakaranas ng ganoon, talagang mahihirapan ako pero naantig talaga ako sa eksenang 'yun'* (Although I was not there that time, I was very frightened as soon as I heard the news. I never saw the actual occurrences during the war but it was really difficult for me to listen to the stories of my fellow teachers who were assigned there. My belongings were left in the area including all of my valuable school forms. I really prayed that my fellow teachers were safe and I hope that when we return, it would already be peaceful. As the war raged on, we didn't return there, instead we were assigned to different areas adjacent to Simone to conduct our classes. I can't really imagine the scenarios during the war – mothers were tying their children around their bodies so that they won't get lost. Such act really touched my heart however, if I would be in that position, it would be very difficult for me, FGDQ1A2).

Indeed, teachers were not only the concern of this war. As the FGD said that *'Kung ikompara natin ang lalake at babae, mas matapang ang lalake. Pagdating naming doon, naisip ko talaga ang mga babae kasi mahihirapan talaga sila. Ang gyera magkaiba sa suntokan kasi may pagkakataon na matatamaan ka ng mga ligaw na bala. Nakakatakot talaga ang gyera. Sinundan namin 'yung mga tao sa evacuation site at doon na kami nagturo. Gumawa kami ng mga temporary buildings tapos kung magkakaroon ng bakbakan dadapa na naman kami, pagkatapos naman 'nun magtuturo na naman kami. Ang mga babae na guro, doon na sila sa malayo, kami na mga lalake na guro at mga school heads ay nandoon sa evacuation site. Tuwing papasok at labas ang mga armadong grupo, dadaan sila sa amin. Ipinagpatuloy namin ang pagtuturo kasi malapit nang magtapos ang school year* (Man is braver between man and a woman. When we were assigned there, I thought of the women because it would really be difficult for them. War is different from a street fight because there will be tendencies that you will get hit by stray bullets. The war is indeed dreadful. We followed the people to the evacuation sites where they settled and put up some temporary shelters. If we hear gunshots, we would take cover but after a while, we would resume what we were doing. The female teachers were assigned to areas far from where the war took place while the male teachers and the school heads were assigned in the evacuation site. Every time armed groups enter or exit the area, they would pass by our evacuation site. We continued to teach while we were on the evacuation site since the end of the school year is already near, FGDQ1A4).

Truly teachers' experiences of war was very traumatic and an unforgettable experience. Though they simply laughed on their experiences, but the fear is still in their hearts and minds. War chooses no one that everyone will be displaced and affected. At end, the immediate victims of war were children and women.

It conforms to the findings of Lustig, Kia-Keating, Knight, Geltman, Ellis, Kinzie, and Saxe (2004) that child and adolescent refugees suffer from significant conflict-related exposures. Reactions to stress may be mediated by coping strategies, belief systems, and social relations.

As part of coping mechanism, teachers underwent stress debriefing. The United Nation Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) extended their help not only to the teachers but especially to the pupils of Simone Elementary School. There were series of activities conducted. It conformed to the statement given by the FGD that *'nagkaroon kami ng stress debriefing na pinasimunoan ng UNICEF. Ipinahayag naming ang lahat ng aming nararamdaman. Doon kami nagtawanan, nag-iyakan hanggang sa nabawasan an gaming takot'* (the UNICEF conducted a stress debriefing on the teachers. We expressed all of our feelings there – we laughed, we cried until our fears were mitigated, FGDQ2A1). They also added that it helped them to lessen the impact of fears. *'Oo nakatulong talaga. Nabigyan kami ng pointers kung paano i-cope up ang karanasan naming sa gyera. Binigyan kami ng ideya kung ano ang dapat naming gawin pati na rin kung paano patnubayan ang mga estudyante. Hindi kami nagturo, hinayaan naming silang magdrawin, umawit, at magkuwento-kuwento upang hindi nila maalala ang mga hindi kanais-nais na karanasan nila buhat ng gyera'* (Yes. It was as if we were given pointers on how to cope with the experiences in the war. We were given ideas on what to do and how to continue to manage our students in spite of the ongoing dispute, we didn't teach the lesson, we only let them draw, sing, and tell stories in order not to remind them of their bad experiences inflicted upon them by the war, FGDQ2A3).

The stress debriefing was not that fulfilling because until today I could still remember those memories. Every time I heard that someone is shot by the gun, my mind would be totally occupied and disturbed. This made me some difficulties of sleeping and having incubus.

It can be inferred that teachers did not only sacrifice their own lives to reach children in the remotest areas, but they selflessly did their roles as parents, friends and companions in eliminating the grim effect of war on the lives of their learners. They have been the road towards opening the new opportunities for children to leave behind hatred and cling on peace and reconciliation.

Bonanno (2004) stressed that many people are exposed to loss or potentially traumatic events at some point in their lives, and yet they continue to have positive emotional experiences and show only minor and transient disruptions in their ability to function.

The participants also gave suggestions and recommendations to the newly-hired teachers assigned in Simone and in the war zone schools that

'kung mailagay sila sa mga barangay kung saan may probabilidad na magkaroon ng gyera, dapat mabigyan sila ng mga babala na dapat lagi silang handa sa mga kapahamakan o sakuna na maaaring mangyari. Kailangan mabigyan sila ng mga panuto sa mga maaaring mangyari. Kami ng mga kasamahan ko, nag-usap-usap na kami na bawat sa amin ay may espisikong tnugkulin kung uusbong na ang gyera pero pagdating ng panahon ng bakkakan, lahat ng plano nawala at nakalimutan. Parang biro lang kasi nung nagplano na kami, hindi naming naisip na talaga palang mangyayari 'yun. Hindi dapat maging biro ang paghahanda at pagpapalano. Kailangan isaisip ang mga dapat gawin. Dapat ang school heads ay amghanda rin at isipin ang mga kalagayan ng mga guro na naiipit sa bakkakan sa mga naturang barangay. (if they are assigned to areas prone to armed conflicts, they should be given instructions or warnings that they must be ready for the inevitable hazards which are likely to occur. They should also be given instructions on what to do if armed conflicts would arise. We, the teachers there assigned each other for specific tasks if war would take place but during the height of the war, all of our plans were forgotten because of fear and terror. We made that plan as a joke but we didn't know it would really happen. Preparation for the likelihood of a war must not be considered as a joke. Our school heads should also prepare for such occurrences and they must think about the teachers assigned to such areas, FGDQ4A1).

Conversely, the FGD reiterated that,

'sa napansin ko ngayon, 'yung mga bago na guro na may edad 21 o 22 parang relaxed masyado. Tiyak na hindi sila magiging handa kung mangyari sa kanila ang nangyari sa amin. Kasi iba ang guro noon kaysa ngayon. Sigurado kaunti lang sa kanila ang makakaranas ng gyera kasi palagi silang wala. Baka nga 'yung mga school forms nila hindi na nila maisip na kunin pa basta't maipagtanggol lang nila ang kanilang mga sarili' (I noticed that newly employed teachers aged 21 or 22 are very relaxed. If such event would happen to them, I am very sure that they will not be ready because teachers then are very different from the type of teachers we have now. I guess only a few newly hired teachers will experience what we experienced because some of them will always be absent. I am very sure that they will forget to secure their school forms when a war engulfs because all they would think about is saving themselves, FGDQ4A2).

They recommended that the government should take part to ensure that teachers are given the protection that they need during armed conflict. As reflected on FGDQ4A3 that

'sana ang gobyerno ay mamatnugot ng trainings at symposiums na mayroong layunin na magbigay ng panuto sa mga kailangan gawin ng mga guro at estudyante sa panahon ng bakkakan lalo na't ang mga pangyayaring yaon ay walang pinipiling oras at panahon' (I hope the government will conduct training or (disaster) preparedness symposiums for events as such because it is inevitable. They should also give instructions about what the teachers and the students should do when tensions arise).

Lastly, they recommended that

'sa mga bagong guro, may iilan na easy-go-lucky lang. Mas inuuna pa nila ang kanilang mga sarili kaysa kanilang mga tungkulin bilang guro. May iba na kung magkakaroon lang ng kaunting problema ay hindi na agad papasok, paano pa kaya kung maranasan nila ang gyera. Iniisip kasi nila na hindi na ulit magkakaroon ng bakkakan' (There are some newly hired teachers who are easy-go-lucky. They prioritize their personal joys instead of attending to their responsibilities as teachers. We noticed that newly hired teachers who would experience weariness from work would easily give up. What if they were on our place? What if they would experience what it is like to be caught between warring factions? These teachers are very relaxed because they think it won't happen again, FGDQ4A4).

Newly-hired teachers assigned in the war zone should be vigilant at all times. They should have the preparedness especially on keeping their students' forms. On the other hand, they should show a profound commitment in serving by giving the best of their abilities and not only because of the salary have they received.

It vividly implies that the government should educate the teachers well on the situation of the community where they were assigned. Because it could give them the preparedness on what to be done whenever conflict may arise. On the other hand, teacher commitment plays a crucial role in bringing quality education to the war stricken areas. They are the paragons to motivate their learners to continue their quest towards a higher learning and soon they would be the catalyst of change.

Finally, teachers' commitment could also be seen on how they were motivated by their peers, principals and supervisors. Singh and Billingsley (1998) foregrounded principal leadership/support influenced teachers' professional commitment directly and also indirectly through peer support. The largest direct effect on teachers' professional commitment was from peer support. These findings indicate the importance of principals' leadership in enhancing teachers' commitment and the effect principals can have on teachers' collegial relationships.

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